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Towson Attorney Designs Project to Benefit Legal Aid

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Lawyer Eliot M. Wagonheim of Towson has designed a project that will benefit two Baltimore County law-related organizations and establish a fund for helping area firefighters who become disabled.

Wagonheim said the program not only will benefit the needy, but also will help improve the public image of lawyers.

"It not only raises money for charity," he said, "but gives people something else to think about the next time they hear a lawyer joke."

Called Take 2, the endeavor will be funded by attorneys who donate either 2 percent of their earnings or \$2 for each billable hour charged on Thursdays in March 2003. As for attorneys who handle contingency cases or who are salaried, Wagonheim said they could participate by donating some amount that approximated such a donation.

Donors may earmark contributions to go to the Legal Aid Bureau for use in Baltimore County, to charitable programs run by the Baltimore County Bar Foundation, or to benefit families of firefighters and rescue workers who are killed or injured.

Wagonheim said he initially hoped to recruit about 300 contributors for Take 2's first year, and projected donations of upwards of \$15,000.

After contacting attorneys about Take 2, Wagonheim is beginning to revise his projections.

"The response has led me to believe its going to be much higher than that," Wagonheim said. "I can't tell you how excited I am by it."

Focal Point

Wagonheim has experience in creating charitable endeavors. He was one of the organizers of the now-famous Chesapeake Blues Festival, an event held each Year since 1998 at Sandy Point State Park outside Annapolis for the benefit of several charities.

But Wagonheim eschewed the publicity.

"I really hope the focus won't be on me doing charity work but will be on Take 2," said Wagonheim, who added that Baltimore County Bar Association President Stephen J. Nolan was instrumental in launching the new program.

Nolan said of Take 2, "Lawyers individually are doing a lot for the community, and this is one way we can channel our efforts."

Wilhelm H. Joseph Jr., executive director of the Legal Aid Bureau, which helps fund legal services for the poor in civil matters, said that Take 2 "is not charity. It's about the professional responsibility of each individual lawyer and the Bar Association."

The Take 2 initiative will reach well beyond the legal profession and serve members of the broader community.

Baltimore County firefighters do not have a formal program to provide a financial boost to firefighters and paramedics who are injured and unable to work.

This shortcoming became evident following terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, where firefighters have such a fund that helps members' families in times of need.

"Let's say a Baltimore County firefighter is from North County and they are injured and are in the shock trauma unit in Baltimore but a family member can't commute from the Pennsylvania line," Wagonheim said. "Right now, the firefighters will pass the hat and help raise money to put the family up, but there is no fund."

Firefighter Michael R. Rehfeld, a ladder truck driver and 17-year veteran of the force, was working to create such a fund, and Wagonheim heard of his efforts.

Rehfeld, reached yesterday between emergency runs caused by the heavy snowfall, said critically injured firefighters and rescue workers often must hire others, such as plumbers and yard workers, to help maintain their homes during periods of convalescence.

"We saw what happened up in New York and how much critical need there was to establish this," Rehfeld said. "Take 2 is the starting point, and we hope to establish an endowment."

Wagonheim, who teaches the professionalism course for the Maryland State Bar Association, said he is working with the MSBA to create a statewide Take 2-type program.

Attorneys who want to participate in Take 2 may call the Baltimore County Bar Association at 410-337-9103 or contact the association at www.bcba.org or Wagonheim at www.wtlawfirm.com.